

Research Note

Youth Conceptualizations of Evil and Implications for Social Studies Education

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It is crucial that social studies research attempt to understand students' conceptualizations of evil because a longstanding societal issue is politicians furthering their agenda through the exploitation of the semantic impact of "evil" (Dews, 2008). If social studies teachers are informed about youth conceptualizations of evil, they might approach curriculum in a more meaningful and critical way, particularly contemporary events. George W. Bush infamously used the phrase "axis of evil" as a rallying cry for the United States' war in Iraq (Bush, 2002) and more recently Stephen Harper has dubbed Iran as evil and also linked Nazism, Marxist-Leninism, and terrorism together as reinventions of a similar evil that seeks to destroy "human liberty" (Marsden, 2012; Perkel, 2014). Evil is a familiar social signifier in politics and popular culture, but it is rarely defined or discussed. Yet, students' nascent understanding of evil informs how they interpret historical and current events and whether they see such events as inevitable, thus affecting their sense of future possibilities. Dissecting the word itself and the concept of evil can change how teachers approach historical atrocities (e.g., genocides like the Holocaust/Shoah) and current events (e.g., political posturing over Iran and Russia). A significant lack of scholarship exists regarding how youths conceptualize evil. To begin to address this gap, we are reporting preliminary research that has shown a complexity in youth understandings of evil, highlighting the need for more exploratory research.

Method

An inquiry to discern what conceptualizations of evil youths hold began in August and September 2013 with a total of 107 Canadian and American youths aged 15-25 completing an online survey. This web-based survey was created through SurveyMonkey®, an online software service. Participants read 23 statements that reflected a range of possible interpretations of evil and then indicated their response using a typical five-level Likert Scale item (i.e., "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "agree", or "strongly agree"). Statements discussed human nature, humans and/or actions as evil (or not), possible definitions of evil, taking action against violence and evil, and the possibilities of future violence and evil. The goal of the data collection was to lump responses into categories previously determined by the researcher: a religious sense of radical evil, a non-religious sense of radical evil, a banal sense of everyday evil, or a postmodern sense of everyday evil.

Findings and Discussion

Using the software on SurveyMonkey®, the statistical results were examined for correlations among questions (i.e., tendencies for participants to answer certain questions similarly). Interestingly, many participants' responses were combinations of different or even seemingly incompatible philosophical understandings of evil. For example, 65% of respondents agreed that some people are evil to their core, but 87% of those who agreed to the prior statement also believed that any person can do evil things in certain situations and 74% believed that evil people could change their evil ways. These responses reflect portions of the philosophies of Immanuel Kant (1793/1838) and Hannah Arendt (1963/2006). Kant considered evil to be an entity in itself, a radical evil for which we have an innate tendency but can possibly overcome through ethics. Arendt's idea of evil stood in opposition to Kant's after she witnessed the trial of Eichmann, a Nazi logistical manager who facilitated the Holocaust. Arendt (1963/2006) refused to see Eichmann as some sort of demon; instead, she revealed him to be a thoroughly mediocre bureaucrat and not an otherworldly evil. In other words, evil manifests itself not only as organized, industrial-level violence against targeted groups, but also as the bureaucratic and banal "non-thinking" routines that underlie such violence. Some of the participants' responses reflected the philosophies of both Kant and Arendt, despite the inherent contradiction between the two; for example, some participants agreed that some people are evil to their core but also agreed to the everyday aspect of evil and even possible redemption. Of those participants who agreed that only actions (not humans) are evil, 32% also agreed that some people can be evil to their core and 12% agreed that humans are naturally evil. Perhaps such seemingly contradictory statements indicate modern humans' inability to distinguish evil. Or, these participant responses might simply reveal a complex understanding that would only become clear as specific examples were addressed in a more open-ended format. It is not possible to draw adequate conclusions about youths' understandings of evil from the data because analysis of the survey items, despite their careful construction, was not able to draw statistically significant comparisons between philosophies of evil and participants' own views.

Future Research

In Western philosophy, understandings of evil have varied considerably over time. Many ideas have impacted, and been impacted by, popular conceptualizations, including the philosophies of Kant (1793/1838) and Arendt (1963/2006). We ponder then, to what extent do youths' understandings of evil reflect Western philosophies, religious beliefs, and popular media? How do these views affect their interpretation of past and contemporary events in their social studies curriculum and the possibilities of future evils?

In order to adequately represent the different ways of interpreting evil, a phenomenographical study is currently under development because this methodology is suited for exploratory research into conceptualizations and interpretations of the world around us (Marton, 1981). Using semi-structured interviews, Social Studies 20-1 students will respond to questions, many of which are similar to those asked in the survey. The advantage of interviews over the survey previously conducted will be that participants can explain their responses. From those responses, the researchers will analyze the responses to create descriptive categories regarding understandings of evil. The previous preliminary study clearly indicated that categories must arise from the participants, not imposed from the researcher. With the

ubiquitous use of the term “evil” in the contemporary political arena, ascertaining how students perceive evil can play a vital role in encouraging thought and action with curriculum and pedagogy to counter societal ills such as genocide.

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